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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes educational trends in Catholic high schools in the 1970s. A discussion of the religious aspects of Catholic school education includes spiritual development of the individual, emphasis on the social justice side of a Christian vocation, faculty responsibility for religious formation, and systematic planning to address the religious needs of students. Analysis of the personal dimension of Catholic schools includes discussion of structuring personal concern for student development into the system and building a sense of community. Finally, the scholarly dimesion of Catholic high schools includes an examination of the return to basics and to traditional skill-building and the development of self-direction in students. (Author/ID)

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EDUCATIONAL TRENDS IN CATHOLIC SECONDARY EDUCATION

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EDUCATIONAL TRENDS IN CATHOLIC SECONDARY EDUCATION - A Presentation to the Annual Convention of the National Catholic Educational Association; New Orleans, April, 1980

I. Introduction

This is a time of unusual interest in educational trends in Catholic schools. Catholic schools are wrestling not only with the questions raised by the back to basics movement and by declining SAT scores, but equally or more importantly with issues which touch the religious goals or purposes of Catholic education. The signs of this concern are obvious. Two years ago, the National Catholic Educational Association established a curriculum project aimed at exploration of how the curriculum of Catholic schools is, or better, can be permeated with religious values. The Jesuit Secondary Education Association began a project three years ago which will run until 1985; the aim was a revision of the curriculum more consistent with the emphases that have emerged in the apostolic goals for Jesuit schools. Numerous other religious groups or individual schools are asking themselves the same questions or embarking on similar projects.

These movements, aimed at defining the Catholic dimension in the curriculum, are responses to two pressures from the environment in which Catholic schools operate. The first is a shift of values within the Church itself. Catholic schools are an expression of the values of the Catholic community and a vehicle for achieving the goals of that community. If the goals shift, then the instrument, the socialization process designed to achieve these purposes, also must shift. An obvious example--if the Church places a new emphasis on social justice, then the schools and the curriculum must adjust to reflect this same emphasis.

The second reason for this renewed interest in curriculum is the increasing demand from those who patronize and support the schools (not to mention those who staff them) to demonstrate that Catholic schools are different, distinctive, worth

the increased and increasing demands they continue to place on those who support them. With the disappearance or weakening of many of the former clear and distinct marks and practices of Catholic education, parents are wondering whether there is any real difference between the Catholic school and the local public school--besides possibly a friendlier, safer and more disciplined environment.

So the questions are serious and must be addressed.

But how can what is happening be described? Many approaches are possible: I prefer to address these issues by focusing on what I consider to be the essence, the defining characteristics of a Catholic school, i.e., schooling which takes place in a highly personal and religious environment. There are three elements: first, schooling, the academic dimension; second, the personal dimension; and finally the explicitly religious dimension.

Obviously this definition is not restricted merely to the subjects being taught in a Catholic school but extends to all of the elements through which a Catholic school attempts to achieve its characteristic effect. My aim is to explore what I think is happening in these areas in Catholic schools today: the academic, the religious and the personal dimensions of Catholic schools. It is my opinion that these trends will continue to influence the operation and improvement of Catholic high schools in the near future.

II. Prenote

There is an important prenote. In proposing an ideal Catholic school graduate it is essential to remain alert to the context in which schools operate. Students very much PASS THROUGH a Catholic high school and are actually present in schools for a very limited time over a period of four years. If you are concerned about the numbers, the following may be of interest to you.

The school is in contact with the student for minimally 30 of the 168 hours in the week or 18%.

Over the period of a year, the student is in school for only 1080 of the 8760 hours in the year or 12% of each year.

I mention these figures because it is important to place in realistic perspective the potential impact of a Catholic high school on its charges. It is my conviction that a Catholic high school can exert a powerful influence on a student. I have seen it happen. At the same time any ideal proposed or objectives devised should be placed in a framework which recognizes 1) that our influence will be limited and 2) that the ideal high school graduate is an ideal for an intermediate stage rather than for a lifetime. Catholic schools cannot produce a finished product; they can only exert a force which may alter the direction of the person who will continue to emerge throughout a lifetime as he/she encounters new challenges and opportunities for growth. This realization has serious implications for the curriculum in Catholic high schools.

III. The Religious Dimension

A. Developmentalism

The ultimate purpose of a Catholic high school is religious and the ideal Catholic high school graduate should be prepared to become a committed Christian. The shift here is in emphasis: should be prepared to be. More and more we have come to realize that the production of Catholics who possess a once-and-for all-complete body of knowledge and practice is a wooden and unrealistic goal. The reworking of this ideal started first with the curricular changes in seminaries, moved over to the Catholic colleges and universities, and then filtered its way down through the entire Catholic educational system. Being a Catholic came to be viewed more and more as a free adult option rather than a status into which one was born and in which one was preserved. Religious growth was seen as a process which continues through a lifetime rather than a process where students were given in the very first stages of their education a set of answers, answers which were

elaborated more and more fully through the educational process until they were finally and totally understood and solidified once and for a lifetime in the philosophy and theology courses of a Catholic college.

In recent years, developmental theorists like Piaget, Kohlberg, Fowler and others seem to have dealt a final blow to the notion of a once-and-for-all-complete Catholic emerging from the Catholic educational system. If their work on the stages through which a person passes in the process of moral and faith development has meant anything to Catholic schools, it is that schools must meet students where they are religiously and morally and that there is no hope of bringing them to any final state as a result of our efforts. Rather, all that we can hope for is to assist development in their current stage and prepare them for development towards the next stage. This realization has dramatic implications for the Catholic high school curriculum.

It means a shift in emphasis from communicating a 'complete body of knowledge' to developing skill in how to learn or grow in the various areas of religious development. For example, instead of attempting to give answers to all of the moral dilemmas that will eventually face a Catholic throughout his lifetime, the primary emphasis should shift to developing in the student the skill to reason morally and to see moral dilemmas have a Christian dimension. This does not mean that content is pushed aside or eliminated, but rather that it is treated from the point of view of developing a personal capacity in the student to move through a process whereby he or she is able to solve personal dilemmas. Since there is no possibility that any formal educational experience (high school or college) would be able to treat all adolescent problems, the ability of students to solve the problems themselves and to see them from a Christian perspective seems more important and vital than making sure that a person knows all of the answers to the moral dilemmas currently regarded as important.

This same attitude can be applied in other areas of religious development. Is it more important that a student know all of the teachings of the Church or that he understand how dogmas came to be developed and how theologians have and continue to investigate and work out contemporary solutions or understanding of theological questions? From another perspective, that of spiritual development, it would seem more important on a retreat experience to teach students how to pray rather than spend the entire time either dealing with their current problems or proposing solutions to problems that they may or may not have. The same application can be made to the reading of the scriptures. It seems more important to teach a student how to read scripture than to concentrate time exclusively on what this or that passage of scriptures means. Obviously, I am overemphasizing the importance of developing capacities for future growth at the expense of an emphasis on content. There is a real and legitimate tension. But I am overemphasizing this aspect in order to bring about a balance which I do not think currently exists between development of content and skill in religious education and formation programs. And in the long run, I do think it is more important to teach skills-- on the assumption that it is better to teach people how to fish rather than give them a fish. In view of the shifting nature of the Church and the changing environment in which we live, Catholic schools can no longer prepare their graduates for a stable Church and religious environment, but must prepare them to be able to devise creative Christian responses to the religious and moral challenges about which we can only speculate today. And when one considers the college environments into which many high school graduates will go, it is clear that no one will survive without the capacity to think and believe for himself or herself.

B. Social Justice

The second major change which I see emerging under the religious dimension

of the school is that of social justice. No one who reads even the summaries of the documents emerging from bishops meetings and religious congregations can fail to notice the shift in emphasis in the past decade to emphasize the social justice dimensions of the Christian vocation. Obviously it is not so much something completely new as it is an aspect of the tradition which has been brought into higher relief by the emerging Christian conscience as it responds to today's problems. As this emphasis has developed, it has struck me as a problematic emphasis for Catholic schools.

There are too many points of instability. At a time when we are making substantial adjustments in accomplishing traditional religious goals, at the same time social justice is being advanced at the overriding purpose of Catholic schools--or at least being proposed as a new and vital emphasis. It is articulated in a variety of ways--producing men for others, Christian social reformers, faith which does justice, etc. But it all converges on the same conclusion--we should be doing much more in Catholic schools to produce graduates who are interested in changing an unjust social order, in working towards solutions to the problems of hunger, war, racial injustice, international development, etc.

On the one hand, we seem to have our hands full just worrying about the personal religious development of our students. On the other, we are being urged to develop what seems to be something beyond. Several years ago, I asked numerous audiences to identify their theories of curriculum. Most of those surveyed, all of whom were in Catholic schools, identified the academic or personal development orientations as the key focus for a theory of curriculum in Catholic schools. Today what is happening is that our religious leaders are telling us that the primary focus of our Catholic schools should be something else-should be the production of social reformers; and we are told that it is with this goal in view that we should plan our programs and evaluate our progress.

I have presented this 'trend' as a problem because that is exactly what it is--a problem which we are struggling to solve and to which no really adequate answer has been provided to date. We have the lofty goal of social reconstruction and we have the schools; and we have ourselves, trying to figure out how to combine the two. There have been many worthwhile efforts: service programs, attempts to insert justice issues into the curriculum--hunger kits, peace studies, units on liberation theology, the problems of the third world, etc., a variety of programs to put students (and faculty) into cognitive and/or effective contact with the days functional realities of these social problems, etc.. All of these efforts have been good; but most of them still seem to be "pasted on" to the existing program, to be an inadequate response to the dramatic challenge that is being posed to the Church and the schools. I do not have the solution, but it is clear to me that this is one of the trends in contemporary Catholic education--not only the activities I have mentioned, but a search for a theoretical basis, an integrating vision which will allow us to see the movement towards justice as an essential element in the Catholic educational process and not just something added onto existing programs.

C. Responsibility for Religious Formation

The third trend that I see in the religious dimension of Catholic schools is the emergence of a new vision of who is responsible for the religious mission of the schools. More and more it has become clear that the explicitly religious goals of the school are not the responsibility of the religion department or the counselors or chaplain, or the members of the religious group that operates the school; rather they are the responsibility of all members of the faculty. This clarification has been helped by the distinction between religious education and religious formation programs, between the academic program in religion and the more general pastoral mission of the school. On the one hand, we have become more professional

and committed to strong religious studies departments whose role it is to be the experts in the content and methodology of religious education. At the same time, however., we have become more aware that the entire faculty must be involved in religious formation activities: in planning liturgies, in directing service programs, in assisting with retreats, etc., if the school is to have the pastoral impact we hope for. The impact of this realization has made itself felt in the selection of faculty and in the expectations placed on all faculty members, even those experienced faculty who for years had left the religious element to the clerical or religious members of the faculty. Today, it is quite a legitimate question in an interview to ask a candidate, religious or lay, what he or she expects to contribute to the religious goals of the school or to ask a faculty member during the process of an annual evaluation how he/she has contributed to the religious aims of the school. Obviously chemistry or English teachers are not expected to teach religion; but every faculty member can be expected to take an active interest and to make a serious contribution in areas where he or she feels most competent or comfortable.

The emergence of the realization and expectation that all faculty will contribute to the pastoral, formational goals in a school is one of the major trends in our perception of how a Catholic school will achieve its goals. This realization has changed and will continue to change the religious environment of Catholic schools.

D. Systematic Planning

A fourth and final trend under the category of the religious dimension concerns the systematic way in which we are currently addressing the religious needs of our students and the religious objectives of our schools. We have attempted to apply, sometimes poorly, but nevertheless seriously, a variety of methods to clarify our religious aims. We are no longer content to use the latest techniques

of planning and evaluation to budgets and curriculum problems, and to leave our religious objectives in some less clear and more vague and undefined realm. We have attempted to take lofty goals and reduce them to more specific objectives and to plan more systematically programs which will achieve those objectives. We have been searching for modes of evaluating whether objectives are actually being achieved. Numerous organizations, e.g., the NCEA, have spent a good deal of time trying to define what we want to accomplish and how we will know it when we have arrived. I was one of the persons who objected when the latest edition of the EVALUATIVE CRITERIA failed to address the question of how we can evaluate the religious formation goals of our schools. In July 1979, the NCEA published my supplement to the EVALUATIVE CRITERIA which aims precisely at this question--evaluation of our religious formation goals. We are no longer content to assume that we are achieving religious ends; more and more effort will go into clarifying goals, defining objectives, evaluating programs--in general, building more systematic approaches into the process by which we attempt to achieve religious ends. This is an important trend which is having reverberations throughout the Catholic educational apostolate and which has the potential of making us more purposeful and effective.

IV. The Personal Dimension

My original definition of a Catholic school is a place where schooling takes place in a religious and personal environment. The concern of a Catholic school extends beyond academic development to a strong personal concern for each student. The school intends that its graduates will have experienced, in a general way, the personal interest of faculty and other students for them; more particularly, that they will have experienced the personal concern of certain individuals (teachers and students) who have become significant and influential persons in their lives. Through these 'significant others' the student should have been able a) to ex-

perience that fact that others value him as a person, b) to accept, affirm and love himself, c) to appreciate himself not only as a unique individual, but also as a member of the various communities in which he can grow and develop responsibly, and d) to come to a realistic knowledge of himself, his strengths, limitations and potential.

It strikes me that two movements in Catholic schools have emerged to strengthen this dimension of the secondary school apostolate: a variety of programs and innovations to give new contemporary expression to this concern for the person, and secondly, an emphasis on the community aspect of the Catholic school.

A. Structuring Personal Concern

Catholic schools have increasingly realized that it is not enough to assume that a Catholic school will, without further planning, provide the means for personal concern for each individual. In recent years, attempts have been and are being made to structure this concern into the normal operating procedures of Catholic schools. Probably one of the most popular mechanisms for this expression is the teacher/advisor, a concept that was popularized through the Model Schools Project. The teacher/advisor concept gives two messages: one to the student, that here is a person who will take special interest in him; the other to the faculty members, that they are responsible in a special way for the personal care of their advisees.

Positive rapport has always existed between faculty and students in Catholic schools; however, with the increase in size and diversity of program offerings in many schools, the possibility that students can be lost between the cracks has become more real; many schools adopted measures like the teacher/advisor to insure that someone would be concerned about each student. Perhaps also as a reaction against the depersonalization that has occured in many public school systems, the Catholic school reacted and continues to react with measures that will prevent the same decline in Catholic high schools.

There is a much wider knowledge of and concern for the effective growth of students. This has frequently been emphasized in the counseling department where many schools have provided 'group dynamics' experiences to allow students to probe more deeply and understand more fully their relationship to their peers. Small group sessions in various disciplines have attempted to provide the same atmosphere.

There is also much greater sophistication evident in dealing with personal problems and more awareness of the role of the school as a referral agency which puts students into contact with community resources which can help them. And in many instances the sense of personal concern has reached beyond the student into the family to address problems which influence or control the student's success or happiness.

B. Building Community

The second major trend which has emerged in the personal dimension has been the attempt to strengthen the sense of community that should characterize the Catholic school. The most obvious and highly publicized effort has been to view the school as a 'community of faith' and to establish a sense of involvement and common purpose based on religious sharing.

It is interesting to note that the research currently being conducted at the Center for Research in Private Education at the University of San Francisco has shown that the distinctive feature of Catholic vis-a-vis public schools in a British Columbia study of educational vouchers is the strong sense of community and mutual commitment to one another that exists among parents, students and teachers in the Catholic schools. It is this community-centered environment that provides the context in which more productive teaching/learning can take place. From the point of view of this research, the community aspect of mutual commitment to one another in the context of common religious goals is the key to the success of the Catholic schools.

A further reason for the attention to this aspect is the diversity and, in some cases, disunity which has marked the Church in the years since Vatican II. Differing theological and spiritual approaches as well as a heavy dose of uncertainty about how we express what we believe, about what is right or how we interpret the scriptures, etc. has produced a need to build the community aspect of Catholic schools in a way which was unnecessary when the Church was undisturbed by internal controversy or conflict.

In any case, there has been serious attention paid to the personal dimension of Catholic education, resulting in a variety of changes intended to promote this dimension. It strikes me that as Catholic schools continue to change there will be increased need to devote time and resources to maintaining the highly personal and communitarian spirit that has always been at the heart of Catholic education. Clearly, the lesson of higher education seems to be that once the concern for the individual declines and the sense of community disappears, Catholic colleges appear to be little different from their secular counterparts.

V. The Schooling Dimension

The third and final item in my definition of a Catholic school (schooling which takes place in a personal and religious environment) is the academic. Schooling is the immediate purpose of Catholic schools. When parents send their children to schools, it is their expectation that they will be educated in the way that society expects and defines--that they will be prepared for the world of work or higher education. Schooling, rather than religious or personal development, is what the faculty spend the bulk of their time doing--planning, executing and evaluating. Religion and personal growth, though they are promoted with explicit rigorous programs, are more descriptions of the environment in which schooling takes place rather than the immediate purposes of Catholic schools as institutions within society.

Once again, it must be remembered that the high school should be seen as an intermediate stage in the intellectual development of a student; thus its aims must be limited and realistic. Three trends appropriate and important to the academic dimensions of Catholic high schools are emerging. These trends emphasize that the ideal graduate of a Catholic high school is 1) someone who knows something, 2) someone who has developed intellectual capacities and skills to a superior degree, and 3) someone who is able, in a preliminary way, to take responsibility for his/her own learning. In short, what I am proposing is that the trends which are influencing the academic dimension of Catholic education today focus on content, skills, and self-direction.

A. Content

It is my strong impression that the trend in Catholic schools is and will continue to be a return to traditional content. This may be a return, as some would put it, to the basics. However, I do not consider it a reactionary position. In high schools as well as colleges, too much was given away in response to student discontent and demands. There are three principles for determining the content of a curriculum: the structure of the discipline (what the discipline says is the most important to know), what the faculty want to teach, and what the students are interested in. The late sixties and early seventies brought an emphasis away from the first of these principles and a shift to the second two. As a result, schools in general, and Catholic schools among them, offered some very strange elective courses to students who had minimal contact with more basic material and work. Schools are returning to an emphasis on the first of these principles, without eliminating the faculty and student interests, but definitely returning to a content which is taught primarily because it is worth knowing rather than because it meets some current interest or need. The program will more and more focus on communicating a significant portion of the cultural heritage, mainly

through the study of enduring books, concepts, ideas. Advanced courses will concentrate on areas which are extensions of subjects traditionally studied in high schools, rather than undergraduate survey courses, e.g., in the social sciences, imported from the first two years of college. In other words, I am suggesting that there will be a return to the more basic in terms of the content of instruction.

B. Intellectual Skills

As there will be a recovery of traditional content, so there will be a return to traditional skills, e.g., to developing the ability to write clearly and cogently. Three years ago, it was apparent at the high school where I was Headmaster (Regis, New York City) that many very bright students had very poor study habits. At the same time, articles began to appear stating that colleges, including some of the most prestigious, were faced with the paradox of the superior student who did not know how to study. As a result, the faculty focused serious attention on study skills, a project that ended in the publication of a book entitled The Regis Study Skills Guide. Subsequently, this book was made available to other Catholic and independent schools. Within the next two years, over 45,000 copies were sold. Without assigning blame, it is a fact that students today need more attention and concentration on the basic skills and that Catholic schools must shift to provide that attention.

The need to develop intellectual skills has a second, equally important element. There is no need to repeat for you the descriptions of rapid change in which we find ourselves, e.g., the number of times a person will change careers in his/her lifetime, the shorter and shorter time it takes to double the available knowledge. There is no doubt that we become less and less able to teach students the what, the content, the information, they will need to know in their lifetimes. What this requires is the need to focus more attention on developing the intellectual skills, e.g., the cognitive skills described by Bloom - the ability to

comprehend, evaluate, analyze, synthesize, etc. No longer can it be assumed that students will develop these skills; rather, attention must be concentrated directly and explicitly on their development. Students must learn how to learn and this objective must be one of our primary and explicit goals in Catholic high schools.

C. Self-Initiation

The final element emerging in the academic dimension of Catholic secondary education is the development of self-initiation and self-direction in learning. This may seem, at first, to be in contrast with the suggestion above that Catholic schools will be returning to traditional content. However, while the content of education should and probably will remain traditional, the process of education should incorporate many of the insights of recent educational movements which have allowed students greater freedom in achieving traditional educational objectives. The ideal of any educational institution should be to produce independent learners, persons who are able to set their own objectives, organize resources to achieve them, and accomplish them at a rate which is appropriate to their abilities and background. To the extent that such educational programs provide for flexibility in the achievement of objectives, to that extent they will be promoting this ideal. This means the reform of many structures and the measured utilization of many familiar educational innovations: flexible groupings, modular scheduling, unscheduled time, the resource center concept, modified forms of individualization including independent study, etc. The aim will be to transfer to the student, to the extent possible, increased responsibility for his/her own education. Obviously this must be done within a framework which insures accountability. How many educators have learned from experience that whenever an adolescent is given increased flexibility, a well-defined structure in which you expect the freedom to be exercised must be designed. Without this structure, freedom for an adolescent becomes chaos for the student and for the adults who must work with him/her.

Self-direction is an ideal which Catholic schools cannot afford not to promote. If students cannot be taught self-direction and self-initiative in a limited fashion in the controlled environment of a high school, then schools can hardly argue that they are preparing their students for a college experience which will demand that they take responsibility for themselves. Though it will be implemented in various ways in different schools, the development of a greater degree of self-initiation will be a vital concern of Catholic high school educators--if they are alert to the demands that will be placed on their graduates.

VI. Conclusion

Obviously not everyone here will agree with all of my observations. Curricular winds are many and blow in every direction. As someone once observed: don't run after buses or educational trends; in either case, there will be another one along soon.

I have tried to analyze the experience of Catholic high schools in the 1970's and to discern the currents which are changing the direction of Catholic secondary education--determining not only its present course, but also its future. You may agree, or disagree, with this analysis. I remain convinced that these trends are permeating Catholic education, its values, its structures, its operational procedures, its materials, its personnel, its curriculum. What seems more important is that you identify for yourself the trends which you judge are worthwhile and productive. It is the responsibility of those who lead Catholic education to determine its future. Only by careful reflection and enlightened evaluation of the multitude of educational forces and trends can Catholic education assure itself that the achievements of its future will match the significant accomplishments of its past.